

Statement of Hilary O. Shelton
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On H.R. 40, Reparations Legislation
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Thank you all for being here and for your hard work on this very crucial issue. My name is Hilary Shelton and I am the Director of the NAACP Washington Bureau, the federal public policy arm of our nation's oldest and largest grassroots civil rights organization.

The NAACP has consistently supported H.R. 40 and Congressman Conyers' efforts to secure a commission to address the issue of reparations for Americans of African descent that were the victims of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the generations of mistreatment and even atrocities that followed.

Slavery in the United States was always about economic enrichment. For 250 years, the institution of slavery was a profitable economic institution in America that was supported and enhanced by nearly every other institution in our nation.

From the individual who captured and enslaved Africans on the continent of Africa, to the shipping company that brought our ancestors to the United States, the insurance companies that insured the perishable and precious human cargo and the auctioneer who sold us, slavery made great profits for a lot of people while forcing and then relegating another group of human beings to lives of servitude and a branding of inferiority to promote white supremacy.

Then, of course, there were the slave owners themselves who made great profits from the forced work of others.

Even today, it can be very persuasively argued that the residuals of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its economic incentives play a profound role in the treatment of Americans of African descent.

Though many of us are able to overcome in spite of the racism and legal and de facto hurdles we have been forced to face, African Americans are, on the whole, at a distinct disadvantage and treated much worse than our Caucasian counterparts.

Despite the President's claims that the US economy is on the road to recovery, the unemployment rate among African Americans, on any given day, is more than double that of whites. According to our nation's most recent labor index, the unemployment rate of Whites throughout our country is 4.7%, while the unemployment rate among African Americans is 10.8%.

The median income of black families in 2005 is less than 73% that of white families.

More than 22% of African Americans lived in poverty in 2001, compared to just under 8% for whites.

The family income for the average African American household is just more than 60% that of their Caucasian counterpart.

The homeownership rate for African Americans in 2003 was under 50%, compared to more than 70% among white families. Blacks are denied mortgages or home improvement loans at twice the rate of Caucasians.

And at the other end of the scale, it is estimated that 50% of all homeless people in the United States are African American.

Of all US businesses, 4% are owned by African Americans, compared to more than 84% which are owned by Caucasians.

These economic figures translate into other areas as well. In education, 7% of whites ages 16 to 24 were not enrolled in school and had not completed high school, whereas 12 percent of African Americans had dropped out.

And, despite the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution, the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, decades of civil rights laws and volumes of talk about improving our schools, a dramatic disparity in the quality of public education continues to plague our nation. Teachers with less than 3 years of experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate they teach in predominantly White schools.

Currently, although more than 16% of college-aged Americans are black, African Americans represent only 11% of the current college population. For every 10 Caucasians who graduate from college, only 6.3 blacks do. Furthermore, 16% of African Americans currently hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 32% of white Americans.

And, as studies have shown, the higher the level of educational attainment, the greater the enhancement of one's quality life and the less likely a person is to end up in jail. However, it appears to be magnified in the case of African Americans: Americans of African descent are also currently treated in a disparate manner by the American criminal justice system.

Black males born today have a one in three chance of spending a year or more in state or federal prison during their lifetime, compared to a one in seventeen chance for white males.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, African Americans make up 13% of illicit drug users in the United States. However, according to the Sentencing Project, a policy research institute funded in part by the Department of Justice, African Americans constitute 35% of all arrests for drug possession, 55% of all drug possession convictions and a whopping 74% of people sentenced to jail for drug possession. White people, by comparison, make up 74% of illicit drug users but roughly account for only one fifth of those serving jail time for drug possession. Put simply, this means that if a white man in Amherst and a Black man in Buffalo both personally consume illicit drugs, the Black man is over 20 times more the likely to wind up in jail.

Furthermore, a black person's average jail sentence is six months longer than a White's for the same crime.

It is estimated that African Americans currently comprise about 45% of our nation's total jail and prison population, and this number will undoubtedly grow as African American women are the fastest growing prisoner population these days.

African Americans also continue to suffer disproportionately from many severe health problems and have higher mortality rates than whites for many treatable health conditions. For example, diabetes strikes African Americans 70% more

often than Caucasian Americans. Furthermore, African Americans are 40% more likely to die from coronary heart disease and 35% more likely to die from cancer than whites.

African Americans are, on average, twice as likely to die from disease, accident, behavior and homicide at every stage of life than Whites; as a result the current life expectancy for African Americans is 72 years, compared to 78 years for Caucasian Americans.

AIDS has been particularly vicious to African Americans: the prevalence of HIV infection in blacks doubled in the last decade while remaining stable among whites. Currently, African Americans between the ages of 18 and 59 are 13 times more likely to become infected with the HIV virus than their white counterparts.

In short, individuals of African descent have always played an important part in bolstering the American economy, and we have consistently been at the low end of the reward scale.

It is time that we as a nation recognize the important role Americans of African descent have played in our nation's history and development and that we continue to suffer simply because of the color of our skin and the past treatment of our ancestors.

With this clear and convincing evidence there should be no question that at the very least, a commission should be established to systematically address these challenges that confront African Americans. That is why the NAACP is deeply committed to the enactment of HR 40, and we will continue to support this important legislation. We are in this for the long haul.